

Article

Prospects for Higher Shia Religious Education in Post-Soviet Countries

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Abstract: The opportunity to receive religious education plays an important role in the formation of the religious elite of society. It forms the Muslim clergy, which, in turn, represents this community in front of other members of society. Their statements directly affect the attitude of non-Muslims towards the members of this community, which is very important, especially in the cases where Muslims are a minority, and Shi'ites, in turn, are a minority in all post-Soviet countries except Azerbaijan. The Shia communities of the post-Soviet region are little studied in general. Analysing their specifics, one can see that almost all the clerics of these communities received religious education in Iran and/or Iraq, while the Sunni clerics of the same countries most often studied in their homeland. This problem in the aspect of comparing Sunni and Shia education, as well as the past (starting from the USSR times), the present and the future of Shia higher religious education were studied in this paper.

Keywords: religious education; Shia/Shi'ism; Islamic education; Islam in post-Soviet countries; Islam in Central Asia; Islam in Russia

1. Introduction

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the socialist world, a religious renaissance took place in the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and it touched not only the confessions of Christianity but also Islam. This, in turn, was of great importance, given the all-embracing nature of the Islamic religion and the existence of political Islam at the time. In turn, this affected the issues of religious education. According to M. Murtazin, the development of religious education since the late 1980s of the twentieth century was caused by the following: the awakening of interest among Muslims in the study of religious rites, the Arabic language, the Qur'an and the history of Islam, which led to the opening of numerous theological educational institutions; significant financial and material investments in the creation and development of Islamic educational institutions by foreign Islamic organizations; the growing need for professional Muslim clerics (Gusenova 2019, p. 128).

Given that Islam in the USSR had a pronounced secular character, and Islamic education existed in a very limited form, local Muslims were losing their religious identity, and this led to the fact that many of them did not know the foundations of their faith, including their belonging to Sunni or Shia Islam. In addition, if the Sunni Muslims, who represented the majority of Muslims in the region, had at least some religious educational institutions in the era of the USSR, the Shi'ites did not have this. In general, the problems of the Shia communities in the post-Soviet space are little studied. Although there are a number of similar studies, if we turn to the Russian-language literature we will see that most of the researchers of Shi'ism devote their studies to the problems of Iran and its political influence on the countries of the region.

This study is devoted to the problems of Shia higher religious education in post-Soviet countries since the Soviet period. There are a number of studies devoted to the analysis of Islamic education in the countries of mentioned region, but they all relate to Sunni



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education, which makes sense since the majority of Muslims in the region belong to this branch. However, the topic of Shia religious education is also relevant, as Shia communities are growing, and their development prospects can play a significant role in the future of the region. Therefore, in this study, I also analysed the problems of Sunni religious education in order to identify the possibility of the same problems appearing in the implementation of Shia education.

I argue that one of the problems faced by Shia communities of post-Soviet region is the lack of their own educational institutions where local Shia could receive religious higher education. This paper starts by describing a chronological description of Islamic religious education in the region. Since the majority of events were related mainly to Sunni religious education, I provide just a brief description of them because it allows us to understand better the situation with religious education in the region in general. All this analysis leads to the confirmation of the lack of Shia religious higher educational institutions. Therefore, in the Discussion section, I attempt to state possible solutions to this problem, also by studying the problems faced by existing Sunni religious higher education institutions.

In general, the opportunity to receive religious education plays an important role in the formation of the religious elite of society. It forms the Muslim clergy, which, in turn, represents this community in front of other members of society. Their statements directly affect the attitude of non-Muslims towards the members of this community, which is very important, especially in the cases where Muslims are a minority, and Shi'ites, in turn, are a minority in all post-Soviet countries except Azerbaijan.

2. Results

2.1. *Shia Islamic Education in the Soviet Period*

During the Soviet period, the state tried to control religious institutions through the formed "Spiritual Administration of the Muslims". Therefore, only one of them had in its composition the majority of Shia religious figures. It was the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Transcaucasia (or Transcaucasian Muslims' Spiritual Administration), which since 1992 became known as the Caucasus Muslims' Board. Its leader since 1980 is Allahshukur Pashazade¹, and it is rather interesting that he received his religious education at Mir-Arab Madrasa in Bukhara (Uzbekistan) which generally provided a Sunni religious education. That is, due to the lack of Shia madrasas and Islamic universities, those wishing to become Shia religious figures were forced to study in Sunni educational institutions (Tahiiiev 2021, p. 16). However, it should be noted that even the Sunni education that existed in the Soviet times was under the strict dictate of the state, which paid special attention to key issues: the formation of curricula and the admission of only persons verified by the authorities. Legal Islamic education was provided in Bukhara and Tashkent (Mir-Arab and Barak-Chan), but the number of graduates and the quality of their education did not meet the needs of Soviet Muslims. According to V. Akhmadullin, the leaders of the Soviet state decided to open these madrasas, first of all, because of the need to convince the whole world of the triumph of freedom of conscience in the USSR, geographical proximity to states with a predominance of the Muslim population. Due to the policy of the party-state apparatus and the natural attrition of mullahs, Muslim communities experienced a constant shortage of qualified mullahs. Despite the efforts made, the Soviet state could not suppress the desire of many Muslims to pass on their knowledge to children in the course of family education. Moreover, some Muslims took risks and received Islamic knowledge outside the family—in underground circles and schools. This inevitably led to a catastrophe in terms of providing local Muslims with highly educated personnel (Akhmadullin 2019, pp. 171–72). The analysis of the literature on Islamic education in the Soviet period shows the absence of Shia higher religious educational institutions at that time when even local Shia clerics were studying in Sunni Islamic institutions.

2.2. Seeking Islamic Knowledge Abroad

Considering that there were no independent Muslim religious educational institutions in the countries of Eastern Europe, it became necessary to invite imams and teachers from other Muslim countries. This thesis is confirmed by practical examples: Sunni organizations and communities invited religious leaders mainly from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Qatar and Kuwait, Shi'ites—from Iran. One of the main trends of the 1990s for Muslim youth there was also an opportunity to receive higher Islamic education abroad. The impossibility of receiving a quality Islamic education at home encouraged young people to go abroad for education, which led to their assimilation of ideas and traditions that are not typical for local Muslims, and sometimes to the perception of radical sentiments (Issaev et al. 2022). Therefore, the Crimean Tatars solved the problem of the lack of higher Islamic education in Crimea with the help of foreign Islamic universities. They went to study in Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and other countries of the Islamic world. The most significant were the groups that went to study at universities in Turkey. The figures given by the representatives of the Crimean Muslims' Spiritual Administration are around 200 people. Significantly fewer students were sent to Islamic universities in Arab countries, and they went there, as a rule, through private contacts and agreements with the host country. At the same time, as E. Muratova notes, the external channel for obtaining Islamic education by the Crimean Tatars was recognized by the leadership of the Crimean Muslims' Spiritual Administration as ineffective—both in the Turkish and in the Arab areas, including because of the fear that young people, receiving education in Arab universities, could fall under the influence of various “radical” ideas (Muratova 2008, p. 48).

Thus, we see that receiving religious education abroad was subject to criticism and was fraught with the penetration of ideas alien to “local Islam” into the post-Soviet countries. Thus, in Tajikistan they tried to solve this problem at the legislative level, and in Paragraph 6 of Article 8 of the Law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations” (the paragraph ratified on 28 June 2011), it is said that education in foreign religious universities is allowed only after receiving religious education in the Republic of Tajikistan and with written consent of the Ministry of Education and the Committee for Religious Affairs under the Government of Tajikistan (Law of the Republic of Tajikistan 2018). These authorities issue a permit for religious education abroad only after completing primary education in their home country. Y. Yegorov writes that the leadership of the republic is concerned that a large number of young people go to receive religious education in Iran and Saudi Arabia. The first country is dominated by Shi'ism, while the majority of Tajiks are followers of Sunnism, and the second, although it provides prestigious Sunni education, preaches a too conservative version of Islam (according to some sources, Wahhabism is the main direction of Islam in Saudi Arabia). In general, as part of the fight against extremism, in 2013 alone, the Government of Tajikistan returned to their homeland 2705 students who studied in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Libya and Egypt (Yegorov 2014, p. 32).

Similar problems exist in Uzbekistan, where also students prefer to study abroad. Despite the fact that there are large Shia communities in Uzbekistan, especially in the cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, there are no opportunities to receive a Shia higher religious education. In addition, obtaining such education in Iran (and anywhere else abroad) is not welcomed by the local authorities too. O. Chikrizova and A. Shumakova write that education in Pakistan is different, and that educational institutions often support the Salafi interpretation of Islam, while education there is much cheaper than, for example, in Saudi Arabia. As for Iran, Shia branch of Islam dominates there, meanwhile the vast majority of the inhabitants of the countries of Central Asia profess Sunni Islam. In addition, most of the Central Asian republics have rather difficult relations with Iran, as a result of which often receiving religious education in Iran can complicate the search for a graduate job in his homeland, not only in the spiritual but also in the secular field, for example, in public service. The Government of Uzbekistan does not recognize diplomas obtained abroad and does not encourage such education. However, every year Uzbeks find opportunities to travel abroad for religious education (Chikrizova and Shumakova 2020, p. 293). Interestingly, the

last aspect, which is the complexity of historical relations between Iran and the Central Asian countries from the point of view of the Sunni-Shia confrontation, has already been studied by a number of researchers (Mullodzhonov 2019).

The confessional diversity of the post-Soviet countries (the fact that the majority were Sunnis), together with ethnic diversity (the majority of Muslims in the region belong to the Turkic peoples) and the secular orientation of local governments, brought them closer to Turkey. Thus, K. Kudayarov analysed this influence on the example of the rapprochement between Kyrgyzstan and Turkey and wrote that it was the latter that managed to satisfy the needs of the population to fill the ideological vacuum formed with the collapse of the USSR and the related need for greater awareness of Muslim identity. He also singled out the following successes of the Turkish religious policy in Kyrgyzstan: (1) Turkey ousted other states that claimed a monopoly on the “export of Islam” by developing a variant of Islamization suitable for Kyrgyzstan, which combines Kyrgyz customs and Islam; (2) the Turkish authorities finance the construction of religious institutions and are engaged in the provision of educational services of a religious nature; (3) the reforms carried out by Diyanet (Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs) in Kyrgyzstan are related to the training of local religious figures and the modernization of Muslim educational programs (Kudayarov 2018, p. 3). Although the idea of “exporting Islam” in the modern world became known largely due to the result of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and their idea of “exporting the revolution”, it was the Sunni-Shia factor that became the main obstacle to Iran’s success in this field. This also applies to the sphere of Islamic education: in the post-Soviet countries, not only was education not encouraged in the religious institutions of Iran, but also the educational institutions opened by Iran in these countries had problems with enrolling students. Thus, N. Kurbanova wrote that since 1993, joint interstate educational institutions began to be created in Kyrgyzstan, including the Kyrgyz-Kuwait and Kyrgyz-Iranian universities (the latter soon closed due to the lack of students); a theological (Islamic) faculty was opened at the Osh State University, funded by the Turkish foundation “Diyanet Vakf” (Kurbanova 2014, p. 105). These data are another confirmation of the success of Turkey and other Sunni countries (in this case, Kuwait) in the Central Asian region, which is quite logical for a region populated by Sunnis. At the same time, universities opened by Iran or with its support had problems with recruiting enough students, and studying in Iran was also discouraged by local governments due to the provision of Shia religious education there, because Shia Islam was not considered part of local/“traditional” Islam.

Thus, we are logically moving to a period when post-Soviet countries begin to create their own Islamic educational institutions in connection with the need to provide local communities with qualified religious leaders who would receive religious education in their homeland, and not abroad.

2.3. Local Islamic Educational Institutions

We mentioned above that such institutions were created at the expense of foreign Muslim countries (Kuwait, Turkey, Iran), but many of these institutions were nevertheless created at the expense of local communities as well. However, such institutions faced a number of problems, including a low level of education, lack of recognition from the state, funding problems, etc.

The problem of recognition of Islamic educational institutions by the state is also very relevant. Thus, in Dagestan, some Islamic universities, violating the existing legislation, conducted educational activities without a license. As of 2007, only nine out of nineteen Islamic universities had valid licenses from the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation. In universities that have licenses, the requirements of the charter and licenses are often not observed. Not a single Islamic university had state accreditation. This, in turn, led to the fact that the diplomas of Islamic universities are not recognized by secular state institutions, since their programs do not meet the state standard of the Russian Ministry of Education (Navruzov 2007, p. 85). The problem of recognition by the state was especially acute in countries where Muslims made up the majority of the population, and

therefore, the problem of the need for qualified religious figures was more relevant. One of the pioneers of Islamic education in Tajikistan, Z. Nabotov, described the solution to the problems of the Islamic University in the following way: “In our opinion, the only solution to the sore problems was to equate our university with state universities. I reasoned as follows: if 99% of the citizens of Tajikistan are Muslims who try in various ways to learn the foundations of Islam, then why does the state not train personnel for religious education and enlightenment of the population?” (Nabotov 2014, p. 131) Later, this happened, and some Islamic universities in the post-Soviet countries received recognition from the state, but mostly this concerned a minority of universities. In some countries, a different path has been chosen. Since the 2000s, there were forms of Islamic educational institutions, which implemented their educational programs within the framework of the implementation of state educational standards with a religious orientation—“Theology” (Russian Federation, Azerbaijan), “Islamic Studies” (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan)—with a predominance of secular disciplines. For example, the Baku Theological Institute, the Egyptian University of Islamic Culture “Nur-Mubarak” in Astana, the Tashkent Islamic University, the Tajik State Islamic Institute, etc. (Gusenova 2019, p. 128). Quite remarkable is the fact that the last option of integration found its reflection in Azerbaijan, where Baku Islamic University ceased its activities in 2018 after the creation of the Institute of Theology of Azerbaijan under the State Committee for Religious Associations of the Republic. Such a religious institution has more secular disciplines and is more state-controlled. Let us consider this position in more detail.

2.4. Shia Islamic Education in Azerbaijan

Considering that Azerbaijan is the only post-Soviet country with a Shia majority population, and it is the people from Azerbaijan who make up the majority of the Shia communities in the region as a whole, it would be most relevant to consider the religious situation in this country. As in some other secular countries, there was a ban on wearing the hijab in schools and some institutions in Azerbaijan, and in general, the state is suspicious of religious activists, fearing radicalization and Islamization in the country (especially given the neighbourhood with Shia Iran and their “export of revolution” doctrine). The latter was manifested in the events of the Nardaran case and others, which were recognized by a number of human rights organizations as politically motivated decisions² and, in general, are not the subject of this particular study. These facts were cited in order to explain the desire of the state to control religious education and, accordingly, the clergy as a whole, which can explain the closure of the existing Baku Islamic University. Although officially, as I indicated earlier, it was closed due to the creation of the Institute of Theology of Azerbaijan.

Bayram Balci in his study on Shi’ism in Azerbaijan touched upon several aspects that will help us better understand the problems associated with Shia education in Azerbaijan:

- Since the 1990s, authorities began to encourage the mass construction of mosques, the distribution of the Islamic literature and the restoration of private Islamic education. In 1989, the Islamic University was founded in Baku (Balci 2006, p. 88). As I mentioned earlier, this educational institution no longer functions.
- With the opening of borders in 1991, hundreds of young Azerbaijanis went abroad. Most of them ended up in the Iranian educational institutions of Qom and Mashhad, using advantages of what the Iranian revolution established for foreign students. The majority of Azerbaijani students settled in the hawza of Qom (Balci 2006, p. 89).
- The active missionary activity of the Iranians in the first post-Soviet years (Balci 2006, p. 90).
- The existence of the Caucasus Muslims’ Board (a pro-government organization) and the activities of Haji-Ilgar Ibrahimoglu and the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (opposed the secular authorities), whose leaders received religious education in Iran (Balci 2006, pp. 90–91).

Consequently, if previously there was a possibility to receive a Shia higher religious education at Baku Islamic University, with its closure, the only option left is to study abroad. Of course, there is an opportunity to study in theological faculties of Azerbaijanian universities, but they provide secular non-denominational education which is quite different from specific Shia religious ones. Thus, in general, Azerbaijan does not encourage receiving religious education in Iran; at the same time, attention should be focused on the prestige of education in each of the countries. Therefore, the generally recognized centres of Shia religious education are the hawzas (seminaries) of Iran and Iraq, and given the proximity of Iran, support from the state there and a more stable political situation, Shia religious figures from all over the world study mainly in Iran. The process of training students there can take about 5–10 years and sometimes even longer.

3. Discussion

I analysed that many post-Soviet countries were wary of receiving an Islamic education abroad, despite the obvious prestige of that education. The main fear was that, upon returning to their homeland, religious figures would forget about their own roots and about “national” or “local” Islam, despite the fact that they would have to live and work within such a society, that is, among the followers of this “local” Islam. That is, the emphasis is on creating a system of Islamic education adapted to local conditions and mentality and on the reproduction of clerics for the needs of the respective country. For example, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Ukraine tried on the basis of the Islamic University to create a unified system of religious education, so that clerics could receive Islamic education in Ukraine, absorbing the local mentality. This is undertaken in order to fully preserve their identity without separating from the local society. At the same time, agreements were made with foreign universities, including Al-Azhar, so that Ukrainian students would have the opportunity to improve their qualifications (Brylov 2013, p. 109). Therefore, when Shia youth go to Iran (or less often to Iraq) for education and spend more than five years there receiving education, there is a high probability that they will lose ties with the local communities from which they left. Moreover, we must consider that in Iran or Iraq, students live in highly religious environments, and on their return to the countries of their origin, they may find it difficult to live, work and preach in more secular conditions. Receiving religious education in Azerbaijan is/was less prestigious (among other Shia theologians) and at the same time not cheap, while in Iran all interested students of hawzas are provided with free education and scholarships covering related expenses. Therefore, it would probably be relevant to create a Shia Islamic university in the post-Soviet region where people from post-Soviet countries could receive education. In this section, I would like to analyse the difficulties that the Sunni Islamic institutions of the region face/faced in order to predict how Shia educational institutions (if they appeared in the region) could deal with them.

Islamic educational institutions in Dagestan face a number of such problems:

- Local curricula have secular subjects, but in reality, secular subjects are not seriously studied. In a number of schools, these disciplines are present only on paper. This happens due to various reasons—both objective (lack of funding) and subjective (rejection and ignorance of the so-called secular or worldly sciences). A negative image of secular sciences as worthless knowledge is formed in the mind of an Islamic student. A. Navruzov writes that in the view of the majority of Dagestanis, Islamic education began to be linked exclusively with cramming Arabic grammar, singing mawlid and learning the Qur’an by heart, which undermines the prestige and authority of religious knowledge, harms the very idea of religious education, the roots of which are strong in Dagestan society. The curricula of Islamic educational institutions, or rather their implementation, are criticized both by the teachers themselves and by the students of these universities (Navruzov 2007, pp. 82–83).
- Financing of educational institutions is not always satisfactory and not regular. Most of the material costs are provided by sponsors, mainly local businesses.

- The vast majority of Islamic educational institutions do not have the necessary material and technical educational base. Most madrasas and universities lack educational equipment and educational literature. None of the educational institutions of all four levels so far use modern technical means of education (Internet, computers, educational television, language laboratories) (Navruzov 2007, p. 85).

In turn, L. Isaev also identified the following problems, but already at the all-Russian level:

- Problems with employment in the absence of a certificate of higher education. This is manifested in the lack of accreditation and, as a result, a state-recognized diploma among graduates of Islamic universities. This means that people who graduated from Islamic universities in Russia *de jure* remain people without higher education, which significantly limits their further employment trajectories. In addition, the labour market for persons with higher religious education is extremely limited. Young people choose Islamic educational institutions as a religious career trajectory with relatively clear job prospects in the future. In fact, the field of activity of graduates is often limited to the spiritual or scientific fields, and one has to look for alternative options (Issaev et al. 2022).
- Low level of training of specialists. The main methodological difficulty on this path is the focus of Islamic universities on only reading and memorizing the text of the Qur'an, as well as physical training. Almost all higher Islamic educational institutions have well-equipped gyms, and good physical fitness is the same essential attribute of an Islamic university graduate as the knowledge of sacred texts. Quite often, final exams for students come down to checking the memorized verses of the Qur'an, and as a final assessment, it is proposed to memorize the whole Qur'an. At the same time, the memorization of religious texts, as a rule, is carried out by ignoring the humanities and social studies. In the absence of subjects aimed at developing the skills of critical thinking and independent interpretation of the sacred text, students and graduates naturally find themselves especially susceptible to the influence of various kinds of interpretations, including radical nature.
- The problem of financing Islamic universities also carries potential risks of sociopolitical instability. Most universities either receive symbolic support from the muftiyats (clerical boards) or do not receive it at all. In many ways, the existence of Islamic educational institutions becomes possible because of donations from third parties. At the same time, a student of an Islamic university, as a rule, receives full support throughout the entire period of study. The lack of budgetary support is fraught with the fact that Islamic universities begin to focus on their sponsors and patrons and to a lesser extent on the state. There is also a deeper problem—students of Islamic universities often experience a sense of injustice that theological seminaries of other religions have funding, but they do not (Issaev et al. 2022).

After analysing the situation with the problems of Islamic education in other post-Soviet countries, we will see that the range of problems will be largely the same as in Russia. After enumerating these problems, we can analyse the possibilities of their appearance in the case of the emergence of a new Shia Islamic university in the post-Soviet region. The creation of any religious institution requires funding, and given that almost all Shia organizations of studied area exist at the expense of the laity and do not have support from the state, then most likely the situation with Islamic universities will be the same. However, it should be considered that they can receive some funding from either Azerbaijan (for example, from the Caucasus Muslims' Board) or Iran (funded by any marja). In the same way, the problem with educational materials and teachers can be solved. Therefore, this has already happened with the Azerbaijani communities in Georgia. First, religious teachers from the Arab countries, Iran and Turkey began to appear in the region, whose activities played a certain role in the Islamic movement. Since the late 1990s–early 2000s, the Muslim youth of Georgia have had the opportunity to receive higher religious education in the educational institutions of Azerbaijan (Baku Islamic University, theological faculty of Baku

State University), Iran and Turkey. Upon their return, the graduates began to make efforts aimed at establishing the system of Islamic education in Georgia, developing national traditions and protecting the religious interests of Muslims in their country. The result of their work was the activity of two Shia madrasahs: in Tbilisi (for girls) and Marneuli (for boys). Shia madrasah named after Imam Reza in Marneuli for young men has been operating since 1997 and was established with the support of the Caucasus Muslims' Board. Curricula were drawn up; the necessary literature was received from Iran and Azerbaijan. The training lasts three years and involves a fairly deep study of traditional Islamic disciplines, Persian, Arabic and Georgian languages and computer literacy. Books received from Iran serve as manuals on oriental languages, textbooks of theological sciences are compiled on the basis of the works of Iranian theologians and translated into Azerbaijani by the teachers of the madrasah themselves ([Baramidze and Ganich 2011](#)). Since then, more madrasahs have been opened in places where Shi'ites are densely populated in Georgia (for example, in Ponichala). Of course, their existence is a huge plus for local Shi'ism, but still these madrasahs provide secondary religious education. Thus, the problem of the lack of Shia institutions of higher education still exists.

Following the Georgian example, perhaps, it would be appropriate to create at least madrasah in Russia and/or Ukraine and in Central Asia, but in this case, there may be a problem with educational materials, because they would have to be in Russian or one of the Central Asian Turkic languages, respectively. Although, in turn, they could be solved by example of hawza of Iran, where foreign students first study Persian and Arabic and only then begin to study other Muslim disciplines. Again, there would be a problem with the recognition of such institutions and their certificates by the state.

As for the level of training of specialists, as we found out earlier, there will be no problems with access to educational materials in Azerbaijani and Farsi, besides, there are opportunities to adopt the hawza education system. Here, it will be interesting to observe what will be the ratio of secular disciplines to religious ones and the attitude towards them. After all, in fact, the existing Institute of Theology (which replaced the Baku Islamic University) makes a very big bias towards secular sciences, given the secular nature of education and the state as a whole in Azerbaijan. In addition, to some extent, this is precisely one of the subjects of criticism of the education received in this institution by Shia figures in Iran.

In the modern era of digitalization, many turn to online education. Some Iranian universities have tried to adapt to this and even provide either individual courses or complete study programs on Shia Islam in different languages. In this case, the main problems related to the quality of this online education received and, most importantly, the recognition of such a diploma in one of the post-Soviet countries.

Quite interesting would be the possibility of creating a branch of the Islamic University of Iran or Iraq in one of the post-Soviet countries. I have pointed out that there have already been attempts to establish the Kyrgyz-Iranian University, which closed due to a lack of students. Therefore, it might make sense to open such an institution in Russia, given that it would be possible to conduct education there in Russian (the most common language for post-Soviet countries) and, accordingly, the problem with the presence of students would be solved. It should be noted that there have been such attempts. In 2012, a representative office of the Al-Mustafa International University was opened, which worked in two directions:

- Assistance in the collection of documents, questionnaires, interviews of applicants wishing to receive religious education in Iran, for citizens of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine (until 2014).
- Establishment of contacts with Muslim organizations in Russia. For example, cooperation has been established with the Moscow Islamic Institute, where the representative office has its own study room ([Seitov 2021](#), p. 152).

Perhaps it would be relevant to open a full-fledged branch in which classes could be held on a regular basis. However, there will be a problem with the recognition of such an

institution, although it should be noted that the diplomas and the quality of education of Shia clerics are rarely checked by someone (or something) from the outside, that is, by any subjects outside these communities. However, given the very specific policy of the Russian Federation in matters of religion (the wish to control this sphere) and the desire of Iran to spread its influence, the opening of such an institution may be complicated. There are two potential ways out of this situation. It would be possible to consider the possibility of creating such a branch in Ukraine, given the more loyal policy and legislation of Ukraine in matters of religious freedom, but in connection with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the problem with the recognition in Russia of Ukrainian diplomas and specialists educated in Ukraine, and vice versa, has become more complicated. Another possible way out is to open a branch of one of the Iraqi Islamic Universities. Iraq is also one of the world centres of Shi'ism, and its religious leaders are more apolitical than their Iranian colleagues. However, in this case, another problem arises—the financial capabilities of any Iraqi hawza are unclear, since there are very few studies in this area, and Iraq has long been in a state of armed conflicts within the country.

4. Materials and Methods

The main research methods were sociological, historical and comparative. The use of the first one is due to the study of ethnic and religious communities. Shi'ites in the post-Soviet countries make up the majority only in Azerbaijan. In other countries of the region, they are also represented by the communities of Azerbaijanis, less often Iranians, Talyshs, Kurds and other nationalities. Almost all of them belong to Twelver (also known as Jafari or Imamiyyah) Shi'ism. The exception is the Shi'ites of Tajikistan, with big communities of representatives of Ismaili branch of Shia Islam. Significant Shia communities live along the Iran and Azerbaijan's borders with post-Soviet countries. Thus, in small areas of Turkmenistan along the border with Iran and in the city of Turkmenbashi, Shia Muslims, represented by Iranians, Azerbaijanis and Kurds, live. Moreover, in Armenia there is only one mosque (the Blue Mosque in Yerevan) which is Shia, and its attendees are Iranians and Kurds. The situation is the same in Georgia and South Dagestan, where large Shia communities are located due to their proximity to Azerbaijan.

It is not possible to name the exact number of Shi'ites in the post-Soviet region, because population censuses, which were carried out there, took into account the national criterion, and it is not entirely correct to assume that the number of representatives of the Azerbaijani diasporas will reflect the number of Shi'ites since many of them may be Sunnis or representatives of other religions/beliefs. Moreover, no census can take into account the process of religious conversion in connection with its dynamics. Even calculating the number of Shia Muslims in Azerbaijan will be hard because of the politicization of this issue and the different numbers mentioned by various organizations. For example, the Administrative Department of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan states that the Muslim population of Azerbaijan is approximately 85% Shia and 15% Sunni ([Presidential Library 2009](#)), but according to the information provided by the State Committee on Religious Associations of the Republic of Azerbaijan (Dini Qurumlarla İş'uzrəDövlət Komitəsinin), 65% of the Muslim population are Shi'ites, and 35% are Sunnis ([Dini Demografiya \[Religious Demography\] Dated 2009 2009](#)).

The presence of Shia communities in the region is due to intraregional migration processes, due to which large Azerbaijani communities have formed in the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, which in turn form the basis of the Shi'ites in these countries. Thus, E. Seitov, in his study on the Shi'ites of Moscow, indicated that 85–90% of Moscow Shi'ites are Azerbaijanis, and when reading his article, it was interesting to learn that most of the religious leaders of local communities received religious education in Iran ([Seitov 2021](#), pp. 148, 149, 158). The same situation exists in other countries of the post-Soviet area. The community of the only Shia mosque in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) consists of mainly Azerbaijanis, and its imam was Ilgar Radzhov—a graduate of Al-Mustafa International University (Qom, Iran).³ In Ukraine, imams of the largest Shia mosques in

Kyiv and Kharkiv are also Azerbaijanis and graduates of Iranian universities. The need for a better understanding of the formation of communities has led to the use of the historical method and the study of Shia religious education through time.

In order to better understand the problems of Shia religious education in Azerbaijan and in the region as a whole, one should analyse the development of Sunni Islamic religious education too. Therefore, in this study, a comparative method was used, with the help of which it was possible to trace the development of Sunni education and to some extent predict the difficulties that Shia education goes through. Considering that the topic of Shia higher religious education in the post-Soviet region almost has not been studied, in this paper, materials were used relating to Sunni higher and secondary education, Shia secondary education and Shi'ism in the region as a whole.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, I studied transformations of higher Shia Islamic religious education in the countries of the post-Soviet region. The analysis of Islamic educational institutions in the region allows us to see a serious drawback in the absence of Shia institutions of this kind.⁴

Shi'ites of Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space are mainly represented by Azerbaijanis, and it should be noted that there are no Shia religious higher education institutions either in Azerbaijan or in the above-mentioned territory. Those with educational institutions either do not train high-level specialists (to be recognised among other Shia clerics) or are branches of secular educational institutions (for example, the Baku Islamic University ceased its activities in 2018 after the creation of the Institute of Theology of Azerbaijan under the State Committee for Religious Associations of the Republic). Other Shia groups, represented by Iranians, Indians, Pakistanis and Arabs, are more numerous in Western European countries. In the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, their organizations are poorly represented and, in turn, do not have Shia religious educational institutions.

The world centres of Shia religious education are Iran and Iraq. After analysing the graduates of which religious educational institutions are the imams of Shia mosques in the post-Soviet region, we can see that the vast majority of them studied in Iran (mainly in the city of Qom). Considering the religious form of government in Iran, their concept of "exporting the Islamic revolution", the fear of desecularization and the possibility of the emergence/intensification of the Sunni-Shia confrontation in the post-Soviet area, the governments of the region treat graduates of Iranian educational institutions with distrust. However, at the same time, there is no alternative to them, because in order to become a recognized Shia cleric, one must obtain approval and permission (ijaza) from recognized leading senior colleagues, almost all of whom are located in Iran and Iraq.

In this study, I also tried to define the prospects for the development of higher Shia religious education in the region and the possibility of creating a new Islamic university. To avoid the problems that Sunni institutions face, two potential developments have been proposed:

- Funding from local communities with the possibility of obtaining additional funding and training materials from the Caucasus Muslims Board and/or Iran;
- Opening a branch of the Iranian Islamic University; the Iranian side would provide training materials and funding.

But both options have a serious flaw—the location of the opening of such an institution. After all, all countries are secular, and the attitude of each of them towards Shi'ites is different. Therefore, a number of problems may arise related to the possibility of creating this institution (from the point of view of the legislation of countries) and its further recognition by the state.

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- ¹ <https://cabar.asia/ru/kak-zhivut-shiity-v-kyrgyzstane-reportazh-iz-mecheti-imama-ali>, accessed on 16 June 2023.
- ² <https://qafqazislam.com/index.php?lang=en§ionid=2>, accessed on 20 June 2023.
- ³ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/5633/2017/en/>, accessed on 15 June 2023.
- ⁴ <https://islam.global/obshchestvo/obrazovanie/islamskie-universitety-v-rossii-i-mire/>, accessed on 16 June 2023.

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